

# “There’s an intensity to their round-the-clock work” – Patricia MacKinnon-Day on farm women. – Lakeland Arts

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## “There’s an intensity to their round-the-clock work” – Patricia MacKinnon-Day on farm women.



Lakeland Arts

April 25, 2018

Abbot Hall Art Gallery, Uncategorized

Community, Farming, patricia mackinnon-day, tracing the landscape, women farmers

Abbot Hall Art Gallery’s exhibition [Tracing the Landscape: Cumbrian Farm Women](#) looks at an often invisible workforce.

Women who make their mark in the male-dominated world of agriculture are the focus of the exhibition.

Artist Patricia MacKinnon-Day spent a year with five farm women, interviewing them about their experiences. The resulting exhibition is a multi-media art installation that explores their lives.

Here Patricia answers questions about the exhibition:

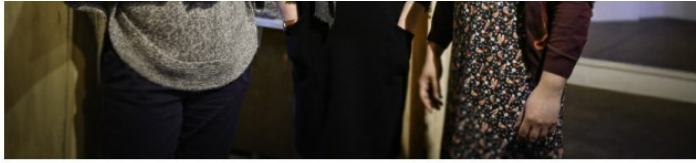


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### What was the inspiration for the project?

Tracing the Landscape evolved from a previous project in 2013, [Rural Voices](#), working with 12 Cheshire women farmers. The inspiration evolved after discovering the strength and tenacity of women farmers and whose everyday lives were challenging. I was inspired by how they dealt with isolation, poor resources and economic hardship. Working closely with the Cumbrian farm women for a year gave me the opportunity to probe deeper and produce artworks that aimed to make visible their contribution to agriculture.

### Why multimedia?

Tracing the Landscape at Abbot Hall Art Gallery consists of five sheds and a soundscape. Each shed shares a narrative, personal portrait that focuses on the infra-ordinary and the minutia of the farm women's everyday life (installed within the sheds are a range of ordinary agricultural and domestic materials, film clips with animation, interviews, photographic / print montages.)

I use the word 'palimpsest' to describe these sheds presenting an artistic process of excavating and investigating multiple layers of farm women and farms over a significant time-period. The element of time in Tracing the Landscape is crucial: as the materials examine the historical to the contemporary using a process of researching and embedding myself within their worlds.

### How did you secure the trust of the women to let you spend time with them?

When I visited the women farmers I arrived without any pre-conceived ideas about the artwork I was going to make, spending hours, days or even months around the farm with the women simply trying to understand how they worked, and all the routine events going on around.

Making empathetic connections to women is central to my practice and helps develop an intimate knowledge and trust. Empathy is key to my research, as learning how it feels to be part of that community and becoming completely embedded as an artist on site is crucial to the success of the artwork. This process of developing understanding over time helps me to access complex meanings within a place, identify special codes, rules and the symbolic meanings of things: semiotic clues as to what is going on.

### What was it that surprised you most about the time you spent with them?

As a city dweller I was previously ignorant of the intensity of their *round-the-clock* workload and of the everyday physical, emotional and economic demands. The biggest shock was to discover that their input has historically been largely unpaid and unrecorded. I was always humbled by their warmth and welcome even in the midst of crisis and during their relentless

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work schedule.

**Hill farming in particular is a tough life and not financially that stable. Were the women committed to farming or was it the only way they felt they could make a living?**

That despite the hardships and challenging lifestyle, they are passionate about their work but made clear to me that it wasn't a job, but a way of life.

**You've said the role of women in farming is overlooked but couldn't you argue that, as women and children have always pitched in when there's work to do, it's actually one of the more egalitarian industries?**

This exhibition offers a discourse to make visible the *farmer's wife* who remains *one of the most elusive figures in agrarian history*. Women and children are always on hand to contribute to the workings of the farm but this labour has been largely unpaid and unrecorded. Although historians have acknowledged their role no attempt has yet been made to scrutinise in detail the whole range of tasks usually undertaken by them and the value attached to this work.

**Does the rest of the country and particularly those who live in cities appreciate farmers' contribution to our food security?**

As a city dweller before beginning this research I envied the tranquil pace of rural life without any knowledge and understanding of the reality of farm production. This exhibition brings to the fore the historic, political, psychological, physical, social and personal endeavours of farm women who bring food to our table. The sheds offer to the viewer narratives that examine the diversity and complexity of their work which includes the battle with supermarket over quality and price.

[Tracing the Landscape: Cumbrian Farm Women](#) is on at Abbot Hall Art Gallery, Kendal, until 9 June 2018.

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